

The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past

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Note on this excerpt

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (b. 1943) is Julia Cherry Spruill Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and founder of the Southern Oral History Program. This article originated as her 2004 presidential address to the Organization of American Historians and remains one of the most-cited essays in twentieth-century American historiography. Hall argues that the standard story of the civil rights movement--a short, southern, noneconomic struggle culminating in the legislation of 1964-65--is a politically constructed distortion that serves conservative ends. Against it she proposes a "long civil rights movement" rooted in the labor radicalism of the late 1930s and 1940s. This excerpt focuses on her reconstruction of that earlier phase--what she and historian Robert Korstad call "civil rights unionism"--and the Cold War forces that suppressed it. Footnotes have been selectively retained to guide further reading.

The black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society . . . and suggests that radical reconstruction of society is the real issue to be faced.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

Stories are wonderful things. And they are dangerous.

—Thomas King

The Dominant Narrative and Its Distortions

The civil rights movement circulates through American memory in forms and through channels that are at once powerful, dangerous, and hotly contested. Civil rights memorials jostle with the South's ubiquitous monuments to its Confederate past. Exemplary scholarship and documentaries abound, and participants have produced wave after wave of autobiographical accounts, at least two hundred to date. Images of the movement appear and reappear each year on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and during Black History Month. Yet remembrance is always a form of forgetting, and the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement—distilled from history and memory, twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in heritage tours, museums, public rituals, textbooks, and various artifacts of mass culture—distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals.

Centering on what Bayard Rustin in 1965 called the "classical" phase of the struggle, the dominant narrative chronicles a short civil rights movement that begins with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, proceeds through public protests, and culminates with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Then comes the decline. After a season of moral clarity, the country is beset by the Vietnam War, urban riots, and reaction against the excesses of the late 1960s and the 1970s, understood variously as student rebellion, black militancy, feminism, busing, affirmative action, or an overweening welfare state. A so-called white backlash sets the stage for the conservative interregnum that, for good or ill,

depending on one's ideological persuasion, marks the beginning of another story, the story that surrounds us now.

Martin Luther King Jr. is this narrative's defining figure—frozen in 1963, proclaiming "I have a dream" during the march on the Mall. Endlessly reproduced and selectively quoted, his speeches retain their majesty yet lose their political bite. We hear little of the King who believed that "the racial issue that we confront in America is not a sectional but a national problem" and who attacked segregation in the urban North. Erased altogether is the King who opposed the Vietnam War and linked racism at home to militarism and imperialism abroad. Gone is King the democratic socialist who advocated unionization, planned the Poor People's Campaign, and was assassinated in 1968 while supporting a sanitation workers' strike.

By confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement. It ensures the status of the classical phase as a triumphal moment in a larger American progress narrative, yet it undermines its *gravitas*. It prevents one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time.

The Political Uses of Racial Narratives

The roots of the dominant narrative lie in the dance between the movement's strategists and the media's response. In one dramatic protest after another, civil rights activists couched their demands in the language of democratic rights and Christian universalism; demonstrated their own respectability and courage; and pitted coercive nonviolence against guns, nightsticks, and fists. Those social dramas toppled the South's system of disfranchisement and de jure or legalized segregation by forcing the hand of federal officials and bringing local governments to their knees. The mass media, in turn, made the protests "one of the great news stories of the modern era," but they did so very selectively. Journalists' interest waxed and waned along with activists' ability to generate charismatic personalities (who were usually men) and telegenic confrontations, preferably those in which white villains rained down terror on nonviolent demonstrators dressed in their Sunday best.

To compound that distortion, the national press's overwhelmingly sympathetic, if misleading, coverage changed abruptly in the mid-1960s with the advent of black power and black uprisings in the urban North. Training a hostile eye on those developments, the cameras turned away from the South, ignoring the southern campaign's evolving goals, obscuring interregional connections and similarities, and creating a narrative breach between what people think of as "the movement" and the ongoing popular struggles of the late 1960s and the 1970s.

Why, then, has the dominant narrative seemed only to consolidate its power? The answer lies, in part, in the rise of other storytellers—the architects of the New Right, an alliance of corporate power brokers, old-style conservative intellectuals, and "neoconservatives" (disillusioned liberals and socialists turned Cold War hawks).

The Old Right, North and South, had been on the wrong side of the revolution, opposing the civil rights movement and reviling its leaders in the name of property rights, states' rights, anticommunism, and the God-given, biological inferiority of blacks. Largely moribund by the 1960s, the conservative movement reinvented itself in the 1970s, first by incorporating

neoconservatives who eschewed old-fashioned racism and then by embracing an ideal of formal equality, focusing on blacks' ostensible failings, and positioning itself as the true inheritor of the civil rights legacy. Reworking that narrative for their own purposes, these new "color-blind conservatives" ignored the complexity and dynamism of the movement, its growing focus on structural inequality, and its "radical reconstruction" goals. Instead, they insisted that color blindness—defined as the elimination of racial classifications and the establishment of formal equality before the law—was the movement's singular objective.

After legalized Jim Crow was dismantled, such irrationalities diminished to insignificance. Free to compete in a market-driven society, African Americans thereafter bore the onus of their own failure or success. If stark group inequalities persisted, black attitudes, behavior, and family structures were to blame. The race-conscious remedies devised in the late 1960s and 1970s—majority-minority voting districts, minority business set-asides, affirmative action, and two-way busing—were not the handiwork of the authentic civil rights movement at all. Germinated in well-funded right-wing think tanks and broadcast to the general public, this racial narrative had wide appeal, in part because it conformed to white, middle-class interests and flattered national vanities, and in part because it resonated with ideals of individual effort and merit that are widely shared.

Clearly, the stories we tell about the civil rights movement matter; they shape how we see our own world. Those who aspire to affect public opinion and policy must always ask themselves not only "which stories to advance, contest, and accept as 'true'" but also how to discipline those stories with research and experience and to advance them with power. In the world of symbolic politics, the answers to those questions determine who will prevail.

The Long Civil Rights Movement

While the narrative recounted above has multiple sources, I want to trace the contours of what I take to be a more robust, more progressive, and truer story—the story of a "long civil rights movement" that took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s, was intimately tied to the "rise and fall of the New Deal Order," accelerated during World War II, stretched far beyond the South, was continuously and ferociously contested, and in the 1960s and 1970s inspired a "movement of movements" that "def[ies] any narrative of collapse."

The outcome was not inevitable. It would take many years of astute and aggressive organizing to bring today's conservative regime to power. It took such effort because another force also rose from the caldron of the Great Depression and crested in the 1940s: a powerful social movement sparked by the alchemy of laborites, civil rights activists, progressive New Dealers, and black and white radicals, some of whom were associated with the Communist party. Robert Korstad calls it "civil rights unionism," Martha Biondi the "Black Popular Front"; both terms signal the movement's commitment to building coalitions, the expansiveness of its social democratic vision, and the importance of its black radical and laborite leadership. A national movement with a vital southern wing, civil rights unionism was not just a precursor of the modern civil rights movement. It was its decisive first phase.

The link between race and class lay at the heart of the movement's political imagination. Proceeding from the assumption that, from the founding of the Republic, racism has been bound up with economic exploitation, civil rights unionists sought to combine protection from

discrimination with universalistic social welfare policies and individual rights with labor rights. For them, workplace democracy, union wages, and fair and full employment went hand in hand with open, affordable housing, political enfranchisement, educational equity, and an enhanced safety net, including health care for all.

The realization of this vision depended on the answers to two questions. First, could the black-labor-left coalition reform the social policies forged during the Great Depression, extending to blacks the social and economic citizenship the New Deal had provided to an expanding state-subsidized middle class and an upper echelon of male workers? Second, could the coalition take advantage of the New Deal and the surge of progressive thought and politics in the American South to break the grip of the southern oligarchy in the region?

Extending the New Deal and reforming the South were two sides of the same coin because seven out of ten African Americans still lived in the former Confederate states and because conservative southern Democrats possessed such disproportionate power in Congress. To challenge the southern Democrats' congressional stranglehold, the movement had to enfranchise black and white southern workers and bring them into the house of labor, thus creating a constituency on which the region's emerging pro-civil rights, pro-labor politicians could rely. If the project failed and the conservative wing of the southern Democratic party triumphed, the South would become a magnet for runaway industries and a power base for a national conservative movement, undercutting the northern bastions of organized labor and unraveling the New Deal.

During the 1940s half a million unionized black workers, North and South, put themselves in the front ranks of the effort. The "Double V" campaign, for victory over fascism abroad and racism at home; the prolabor policies of the Roosevelt administration; the booming economy, which made labor scarce and triggered the biggest jump in black earnings since emancipation; the militancy of the black- and Left-led unions; the return of black veterans—all taken together "generated a rights consciousness that gave working-class black militancy a moral justification in some ways as powerful as that evoked by [Afro-Christianity] a generation later."

International events deepened and broadened that consciousness. African Americans and their allies were among the first to grasp the enormity of the Nazi persecution of the Jews and to drive home the parallels between racism and anti-Semitism. In so doing, they used revulsion against the Holocaust to undermine racism at home and to "turn world opinion against Jim Crow." A "rising wind" of popular anticolonialism, inspired by the national liberation struggles in Africa and Asia that erupted after the war, also legitimized black aspirations and linked the denial of civil rights at home to the exploitation of the colonized peoples around the globe.

At the same time, Popular Front culture encouraged labor feminism, a multiclass, union-oriented strand within the women's movement in which black women played a central role. Women joined the labor movement in record numbers in the 1940s, and by the end of the decade they had moved into leadership positions. The labor feminists among them fought for access to jobs, fair treatment, and expanded social supports within their unions and on the shop floor. They aimed to "de-gender" the idea of the family wage by asserting that women too were breadwinners. Articulated by Claudia Jones, the leading black woman leader in the Communist party, and pushed forward by the Congress of American Women, the concept of the triple oppression of black women—by virtue of their race, class, and gender—stood at the center of a

tradition of left or progressive feminism that saw women's issues as inseparable from those of race and class.

Spurred by this broad insurgency, black political activism soared and barriers to economic and political democracy tumbled. The Wagner Act and the National War Labor Board helped workers temper the power of corporations and forward the dream of workplace democracy. In response to pressure from below, led mainly by A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) in 1941, putting racial discrimination on the national agenda for the first time since Reconstruction. In 1944 the Supreme Court brought a half century of acquiescence in political exclusion to an end when it declared the white primary unconstitutional. Rivaling in importance the later and more celebrated *Brown* decision, *Smith v. Allwright* sparked a major, South-wide voter registration drive.

The Chill of the Cold War

Those breakthroughs contributed to the movement's momentum, but they also met fierce resistance, as the long backlash accelerated. In the late 1940s, northern business interests joined conservative southern Democrats in a drive to roll back labor's wartime gains, protect the South's cheap labor supply, and halt the expansion of the New Deal. Their weapon of choice was a mass-based but elite-manipulated anticommunist crusade that would profoundly alter the cultural and political terrain.

The chief target was New Deal labor law. After the war, probusiness conservatives quashed the campaign for a permanent FEPC, the chief item on the black-labor-left legislative agenda, in part by framing their opposition in the powerful new language of the Cold War. By demonizing the Communists in the labor movement, conservatives also pushed the Taft-Hartley Act through Congress. Under Taft-Hartley's restrictions, the CIO expelled its left-wing unions, tempered its fight for social welfare programs that would benefit the whole working class, and settled for an increasingly bureaucratized system of collective bargaining that secured higher wages and private welfare protections for its own members, mainly white male workers in heavy industries.

To be sure, even as domestic anticommunism helped drive labor to the right and weaken civil rights unionism's institutional base, it gave civil rights advocates a potent weapon: the argument that the United States' treatment of its black citizens undermined its credibility abroad. Competition with the Soviet Union gave government officials a compelling reason to ameliorate black discontent. As a result, civil rights leaders who were willing to mute their criticism of American foreign policy and distance themselves from the Left gained a degree of access to the halls of power they had never had before.

Seen through the optic of the long civil rights movement, however, civil rights look less like a product of the Cold War and more like a casualty. Antifascism and anticolonialism had already internationalized the race issue and, by linking the fate of African Americans to that of oppressed people everywhere, had given their cause a transcendent meaning. Anticommunism, on the other hand, stifled the social democratic impulses that antifascism and anticolonialism encouraged, replacing them with a Cold War racial liberalism that, at best, failed to deliver on its promise of reform and, at worst, colluded with the right-wing red scare to narrow the ideological ground on which civil rights activists could stand.

Both left-wing and centrist black leaders seized the opportunity offered by the 1945 founding of the United Nations (UN) to define the plight of African Americans as a "human rights" issue, a concept that in UN treaties denoted not just freedom from political and legal discrimination but also the right to education, health care, housing, and employment. The State Department blocked that endeavor, carefully separating protected civil liberties from economic justice and branding the whole campaign for a robust human rights program a Soviet plot. Thwarted in its efforts, the NAACP abandoned both economic issues and the battle against segregation in the North and devoted its considerable resources to clear-cut cases of de jure segregation in the South, thus severing its ties to the black Popular Front and increasingly weakening the link between race and class.

The presidential campaign of 1948 marked both the high point and the demise of the postwar black-labor-left coalition. The Dixiecrats also left another legacy: they perfected a combination of race- and red-baiting that defeated the South's leading New Deal politicians in the critical election of 1950 and, ten years later, allowed segregationists to claim that the civil rights movement was "communist inspired." Red-baiting thus got a second lease on life, spawning a dense network of "little HUACs" and "little FBIs," local imitations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, throughout the South, extending McCarthyism well into the 1960s, long after it had fallen into disrepute at the national level.

Continuities and Discontinuities: The 1940s and the 1960s

In the South, perhaps more than anywhere else in the country, the Cold War destroyed Popular Front institutions and diverted the civil rights movement into new channels. When the so-called classical phase of the movement erupted in the late 1950s and 1960s, it involved blacks and whites, southerners and northerners, local people and federal officials, secularists and men and women of faith. But on the ground, in the South, the movement's ability to rally participants, stymie its enemies, and break through the fog of the Cold War came largely from the prophetic tradition within the black church. By contrast, southern civil rights activists, mobilizing the latent themes of justice and deliverance in an otherworldly religion, demanded "freedom now," not gradual, top-down amelioration.

In recent years we have learned more and more about the continuities between the 1940s and the 1960s, especially about the civil rights activists who came to political consciousness in the earlier period and then groomed and guided the young men and women who stepped forward in later years. E. D. Nixon, the stalwart NAACP leader who recruited King for the Montgomery bus boycott, was a veteran of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the black-led union that was central to the movement in the 1940s. Ella Baker passed on to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) the radical pedagogy and organizing style she had learned both from her upbringing in the rural South and from the left-wing politics of Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s. Bayard Rustin, one of the movement's most brilliant strategists, had been "an eager young explorer of the American left, broadly defined."

The differences and discontinuities, however, were critical as well. The activists of the 1960s relied on independent protest organizations; they could not ground their battle in growing, vibrant, social democratic unions. Many young activists of the 1960s saw their efforts as a new departure and themselves as a unique generation, not as actors with much to learn from an

earlier, labor-infused civil rights tradition. Persecution, censorship, and self-censorship reinforced that generational divide by sidelining independent black radicals, thus whitening the memory and historiography of the Left. The civil rights unionism of the 1940s—which combined a principled and tactical belief in interracial organizing with a strong emphasis on black culture and institutions—was lost to memory. As the movement waned and contrary political forces resumed power, that loss left a vacuum for the current dominant narrative to fill.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by the civil rights movement stemmed from what Martin Luther King Jr. called "evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society," evils that reflected not just the legacy of slavery but also the perpetuation of that legacy during subsequent generations by racialized state policies that wove white privilege into the fabric of American culture and institutions. Despite the movement's undeniable triumphs, those evils persist and in some ways have been compounded.

Nor, of course, will understanding how the past weighs on the present in itself resolve current dilemmas. But it can help cut through the miasma of evasion and confusion that cripples our creativity from the start. For many white Americans have moved through what the critical theorist Walter Benjamin termed "this storm . . . we call progress" without coming to terms with the past. That lack of accounting opens the way to a color-blind conservatism that is breathtakingly ahistorical and blind to social facts. It impoverishes public discourse, discourages investment in public institutions, and undermines our will to address the inequalities and injustices that surround us now.

Historians can and must play a central role in a struggle that turns so centrally on understanding the legacy of the past. To tell our stories both truly and effectively, we need modes of writing and speaking that emphasize individual agency, the *sine qua non* of narrative, while also dramatizing the hidden history of policies and institutions—the publicly sanctioned choices that continually shape and reshape the social landscape and yet are often invisible to citizens trained in not seeing and in thinking exclusively in ahistorical, personal terms. We cannot settle for simple dichotomies (especially those that pit race against class, race-targeted against universalistic remedies, and so-called identity politics against economic policy and unionization), no matter how seductive they might be.

Only such novel forms of storytelling can convey what it means to have lived through an undefeated but unfinished revolution, a world-defining social movement that has experienced both reversals and victories and whose victories are now, once again, being partially reversed. Both the victories and the reversals call us to action, as citizens and as historians with powerful stories to tell. Both are part of a long and ongoing civil rights movement. Both can help us imagine—for our own times—a new way of life, a continuing revolution.